

Letters to The Times

Action to Prevent War Feb 6 52 NY Times

Sponsorship of Qualified Group to Formulate Agreements Proposed

The writer of the following letter was instrumental in persuading the United States Government in 1939 to take up the development of atomic energy. He is now a professor at the University of Chicago.

TO THE EDITOR OF THE NEW YORK TIMES:

In 1913, one year before the First World War, H. G. Wells wrote a book, "The World Set Free." In this book he describes the discovery of artificial radioactivity and puts it in the year 1933, the very year in which it was discovered. This is followed, in the book, by the development of atomic energy for peacetime uses and atomic bombs. The world war in which the cities of many nations are destroyed by these bombs Wells puts in the year 1956. After the devastation of a large part of the world an attempt is made to set up a world government which very nearly fails but in the end, somehow, miraculously succeeds.

It seems that all of these predictions—even the dates—may prove to be correct; for now it would appear that 1956 is the year most likely to see the advent of atomic war.

It would take much imagination and resourcefulness—no less perhaps than went into the development of the bomb itself—to devise a settlement that would resolve the power conflict between Russia and the United States and would not only postpone the next war, but create a situation in which war would not be likely to occur again. But up until now the public discussion of these issues has moved at a level of political thinking at which no solution is possible at all. So far neither the Government nor anyone else has presented even the principles on which an adequate settlement could be based.

Preventive War Theory

If we have no concept of a real solution, almost any course of action can be argued, for and against, endlessly and inconclusively. Some military leaders seem to advocate that we take armed action in the Pacific while it is still possible to keep Russia, through the threat of "massive retaliation," from intervening on a large scale. If we accept the premise that it is not too late for a preventive war and if we are willing to devastate China to such an extent that recovery may take one or two generations, then there may be nothing much wrong with the reasoning of these men, except that they leave God out of their equations.

According to press reports, Admiral Radford suggested in September that Chiang Kai-shek be permitted to bomb the mainland of China in defense of Quemoy Island and that

and, above all, committees of citizens set up for the purpose, it may be possible to gather at this late hour several groups of highly qualified men who will think through the problems that are involved. Some of these groups might perhaps succeed in outlining for us in some detail, within the next few months, the kind of international arrangements that we could trust.

The problem lies not so much in working out all the details as in finding the right principles from which the details would follow more or less automatically. The details can wait, but reaching a meeting of minds on the basic principles cannot. Only groups of like-minded men who can agree at the outset on basic premises can hope to come up with something really constructive that may catch—as it must—the imagination of the public, Congress and the Administration.

I am fairly confident that with the right kind of sponsorship to provide the necessary moral and financial support the men needed to carry out this work could be found. We have great resources in men of ability, devotion and—yes, even courage; and such men would make themselves available in response to the proper invitation.

Will sponsorship, however, be forthcoming soon enough and on a sufficient scale? True, we are now faced with a clear and present danger, and it is in such times that patriots may rise to the challenge. But will there be men willing to assume responsibility when nobody in particular has assigned them such responsibility? This, of course, I cannot say.

I am certain of one thing only. Unless we find the right answers soon war will come; and maybe in the final analysis it will come because there was too much patriotism in the United States and too few patriots.

LEO SZILARD.

New York, Feb. 2, 1955.

ber that Chiang Kai-shek has permitted to bomb the mainland of China in defense of Quemoy Island and that the United States agree to intervene in the support of this action if necessary. At that time President Eisenhower vetoed this proposal. In doing so the President followed his instinct, and his instinct is to strive for peace.

It is generally known that the President ardently desires to keep the country out of war. He believes that a satisfactory general agreement could probably be drafted that the Russians would be likely to accept. But he does not know how to make sure that the Russians would keep such an agreement, and he is therefore unable to steer a clear course which offers a chance of leading to peace. With many of his advisers in favor of taking calculated risks and having an early showdown, how long can the President be expected to hold out?

Course of Devastation

The day on which we bomb the Chinese mainland—say in defense of Quemoy or Matsu—is likely to turn out to be the first day of the Third World War. Those who think that the course of such a war can be predicted in any way are, I believe, sadly mistaken. The war might very well end with the devastation of Russia and perhaps also of the United States, to the point where organized government in these two countries would cease to exist.

At the time of this writing it appears quite possible that we may have a reprieve. But such a reprieve can be only a short one. For we have now advanced close to the point of no return, and one of our next groping steps—unguided by a clear concept of the road to peace—could very well carry us beyond that point. This result to me seems indeed unavoidable unless the men within our Government who are shaping our policies will soon begin to see clearly some course of action that may lead us out of the present impasse.

To remove the instability inherent in the power conflict between Russia and the United States will take a far-reaching agreement that will settle all major outstanding issues. Such an agreement, if it offers Russia, ourselves and several other nations strong continuing incentives for keeping it in operation, can create a setting in which the chance of war may be regarded as remote. Only in such a setting is it possible to dispose of the controversial issues which loom so large today. No progress can be made toward this goal piecemeal.

Initiating Leadership

To outline such an agreement in some detail will require the kind of imagination and resourcefulness that cannot be expected from the Government. Our political system the intellectual leadership needed here can arise only through private initiative.

Our only remaining hope is, I believe, that under the sponsorship of universities, research foundations,